Lessons of the Iraq War and Its Aftermath

by David Petraeus **(/experts/david-petraeus)**

Apr 9, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Petraeus (/experts/david-petraeus)

Gen. David H. Petraeus, who retired from the Army in 2011 after commanding U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, served as director of the CIA from September 2011 to November 2012.

Brief Analysis

The 101st Airborne's Experience in Iraq

The 101st Airborne Division returned to the United States in February after spending most of the previous year stationed throughout Iraq's four northernmost provinces. Although the division was engaged in daily combat with insurgent forces in its mission to provide security, it was also heavily involved in the reconstruction effort, particularly in rebuilding vital infrastructure and establishing government institutions. The 101st Airborne functioned under two critical operating procedures: first, to foster, create, and underwrite as many beneficial programs and policies as possible in order to give the maximum number of Iraqis a stake in the success of the new country; and second, to conduct operations in such a way as to remove insurgents from the streets while avoiding tactics and incidents that motivated more Iraqis to join the resistance.

The division was confronted with three different types of insurgents in northern Iraq:

Former regime elements (FREs). These fighters are former Ba'ath insiders who have no hope of playing a role in the new Iraq. Their well-funded leadership structure has been gradually destroyed, most significantly with the deaths of Uday and Qusay Husayn.

Criminals freed by Saddam Husayn. Well before the war, insurgents of this type had demonstrated a willingness to kill. Since the war, they have been dedicated to ensuring that law and order do not prevail in Iraq because they know that it would mean a return to jail. Most of these individuals are unemployed, which made them dangerous candidates for recruitment by FREs.

Extremist groups. Some insurgents of this type originated from organizations based outside Iraq (e.g., al-Qaeda), while others were homegrown (e.g., Ansar al-Islam). These extremists have a vision for the new Iraq that is far beyond what is acceptable to the vast majority of Iraqis.

From the beginning, the strategy of the 101st was to achieve early victories in the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi population and then to continue building on that momentum. Accordingly, the division became heavily involved in several reconstruction missions, including the following: holding early provincial elections, repairing the main bridge spanning from Irbil to Mosul, solving severe fuel shortages, paying civil servants, reopening the Syrian border, and rebuilding the badly looted Mosul University and other educational facilities.

Many of these projects were funded through the Commander's Emergency Reconstruction Program. This funding,

which originated from captured Iraqi funds, was disbursed to commanders throughout Iraq in order to finance various reconstruction efforts. Over a period of seven months, the 101st underwrote approximately 5,000 projects with these funds, including clean-up efforts, infrastructure repair, and information projects (e.g., the establishment of Mosul TV).

The 101st Airborne also played a role in developing innovative methods of reducing violence in northern Iraq. In one case, an ammunition dump became the site of frequent infiltration, leading to several firefights in which Iraqis were killed. Inquiries with local leaders determined that the infiltrators were after the brass used to make the ammunition, not the ammunition itself. Accordingly, a commercial firm was established to extract and sell the brass. Some of the proceeds were then used for hiring local security forces to guard the ammunition dump.

The Iraqi Security Services

The newly recruited Iraqi police have all undergone at least three weeks of special training. Although that does not sound like much, most of these individuals already had some experience in policing. To be sure, even veteran Iraqi police had no experience with the sort of police work done in the West. Under Saddam Husayn, Iraqi police basically directed traffic and handled minor criminal cases, while regime elements (e.g., special security services personnel) handled the major cases. Still, veteran Iraqi police came equipped with several key skills and a modicum of knowledge regarding weapons. Moreover, recruits who had not previously served as policemen were placed in an eight-week training course. Much of this training was conducted by a U.S. military police unit whose primary function is to train both policemen and police trainers.

The process of establishing the new Iraqi police force has been challenging. Finding uniforms, communication gear, and weapons proved daunting. Moreover, in mid-July 2003, former Iraqi military personnel who were uncertain about their wages staged a large riot in Mosul. The Iraqi police killed some of the demonstrators, and the structure of the police force itself collapsed. U.S. forces had to reenter the area and establish order, at a cost of seventeen soldiers wounded and three destroyed vehicles. A new police chief was appointed, however, and over time, the police have performed quite well. They have taken serious casualties, though; they remain primary targets because they are easier to hit than coalition forces.

Similarly, members of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps received three weeks of training before they were put in uniform and sent out to begin their guard duties. Their training continued as they performed missions; the guiding principle was to start them out with basic tasks and then upgrade these duties as part of on-the-job training. Finally, members of the new Iraqi army are receiving much more extensive training because they will be expected to do more than other security personnel (including collective tasks such as offensive operations).

Challenging Times Ahead

Iraq appears much more manageable on the ground than it does from afar. That said, the recent escalation of violence is troubling. Overall, there are several key lessons to be learned from the past year:

Every area of Iraq is different, so there is no one tactic or approach that will work across the entire country. In fact, an approach that works in a given area today may not even work there tomorrow. The enemy has been adapting constantly, and U.S. forces must do so as well.

Great restraint is needed when operating near large crowds of Iraqis. A major concern is that crowds can easily turn into mobs that could pose a serious threat to coalition forces. In the past week especially, large gatherings of Iraqis have become a key source of concern in several predominantly Shi'i areas of the country.

Iraqi security forces need continuous training and sufficient equipment. In partnership with local Iraqi officials, the coalition must also work to instill a sense of pride and trust into the various security organizations, something that

was nonexistent under the reign of Saddam.

Once military operations in a given area are substantively complete, all parties must show the local population that they have a stake in the success of the new Iraq. This will be a great challenge in the Fallujah and Ramadi area, which was a military industrial center that remains home to many former military personnel.

Local initiative is crucial to the future of Iraq, but it is a substantial challenge in a country that has traditionally been subject to widespread centralization efforts originating from Baghdad.

Efforts to keep the country's leadership free from the yoke of Ba'ath loyalists must be coupled with reconciliation. It is not possible to fire all former Ba'athists and expect them to become anything other than enemies. The coalition must reconcile with a number of the thousands of former Ba'ath officials and bring them into the new system, giving them a direct stake in the success of the new Iraq.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ryan Phillips.

Policy #855

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)